

Bagassu Turkii: Senegalese Transnational E-commerce and Social Networks between Dakar and Istanbul

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the forms of agencies, social networks, and transnational e-commerce between Dakar and İstanbul, and the people involved, including migrants, GPs –gratis passengers, grouping networks, and traders. First, it considers the recent economic “charm offensive” by the Turkish state with a view to expanding into the “open African market” at diplomatic, industrial, and commercial levels; then, it describes relations between Türkiye and Senegal. After that, it discusses the visa policy between the two countries, before reviewing the literature on African migration, in general, and Senegalese migration to Türkiye, in particular; and mobility between Senegal and Türkiye, to and from cities such as İstanbul and İzmir. Finally, the paper analyzes the transnational mobility of Senegalese traders. Interviews were carried out in the Senegalese capital Dakar, where most Turkish products transit before being distributed within Senegal or to neighboring countries. The interviews mainly focused on traders who travel back and forth between Dakar and İstanbul, GPs-, and Senegalese businesspeople. Using the power of social networks such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Facebook, they regularly trade with Türkiye while residing in Senegal: indeed, some of them never leave the country.

Keywords: Transnational Mobility, E-commerce, Senegalese Migrants, Gratis Passengers

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, with the globalization of mobility, Türkiye’s main cities—Ankara, İstanbul and İzmir—have become major hubs for international migration (Şaul, 2014). Between 2000 and 2005, Türkiye experienced noticeable economic growth (Dany, 2012). This encouraged migration from all over the world; but today, following economic turmoil and social unrest, entering Türkiye is becoming increasingly difficult for most African migrants.

Türkiye has been at the center of the debate on immigration in Europe since its official request for accession to the European Union. It has become a gateway to the European continent. To contain migration, the European Union signed an agreement with Türkiye in 2016, whereby Türkiye committed to accept the return of migrants who had crossed the border from Türkiye into Greece. Since then, relations with Brussels have soured; the European Union accuses Türkiye of not respecting the agreement despite the enormous funds allocated to it to contain migration pressures flowing mainly from Western Asia (the Middle East) and Africa. Türkiye’s visa policy is relatively lenient, unlike the policies of its European neighbors, which require travelers to complete never-ending documentation and a humiliating obstacle course before being granted permission to enter.

A new era of strategic diplomacy, “neo-Ottomanism” (“*Yeni Osmanlılık*”) (Lea, 2021) seeks to promote greater political engagement between Türkiye and countries that were part of or influenced by the Ottoman Empire, such as those in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although it was born during the Cold War, neo-Ottomanism is today associated with the expansionist foreign policy of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Turkish elite political orientations as well as strategic considerations are determinant elements that have revived Turkish interest in Africa (Donelli, 2020). To a great extent, neo-Ottomanism consists of strengthening diplomatic relations with certain African states including Kenya, Nigeria (Suter, 2017), and, in particular, Senegal, where Türkiye’s presence is notable in cooperation activities that include construction of major infrastructure, such as universities, conference centers, and sports

stadiums. While some have described Türkiye's relations with Africa as "expansion strategies" (Mbabia, 2011), others speak of "geo-economic maneuvers" (Isreb et al., 2021). The fact remains that Türkiye is respected on the African continent. This image presents a real advantage for the growth of its diplomatic, military, commercial, cultural, sporting, and educational relations.

Turkish-Senegalese cooperation also extends to defense, security, and culture. The construction of a Turkish cultural center is planned for Senegal in the coming years. In 2017, the Turkish government regularized more than 1,400 Senegalese living in Türkiye (Chahed, 2017). Many Senegalese traders and social network entrepreneurs, especially women, who have long traded with Spain (via Las Palmas) have seized the opportunity since the mid-2000s to take business trips to İstanbul, or to promote trade exchanges between the two countries without even leaving Senegal. This has not only changed the landscape of Senegalese migration to Europe but has also allowed certain types of traders to specialize in Turkish imports, commonly known as *bagassu Turkii* in Senegal, such as cosmetics, household accessories, clothing, and technology (cell phones).

2. Methods

The paper uses mixed methods, alongside interviews with well-established traders in Senegal, and gratis passengers, who travel back and forth between İstanbul and Dakar. Around 20 in-depth interviews were undertaken in person in Dakar in 2020 before the Covid-19 pandemic, and by phone with former gratis passengers who have settled in Türkiye. The interviews are followed by a desk brief review of the available literature, based on recent works and news media, and an analysis of migration trends between the two countries.

Drawing on agency and social solidarity network theories, the paper seeks to better understand the linkages between migration, religious ties, and entrepreneurship in the era of digital revolution and social networks. We understand "agency" as the capacity of individuals, proxies, and people collectively to have the power and resources to fulfill their potential (Hewson, 2010). Agents act individually at micro-level, or collectively through social solidarity networks (Dietz & Burns, 1992), which are key tools for e-commerce within structuring migratory contexts (Senegal and Türkiye).

As a Sahelian country, Senegal represents a subregional geographic area with different social, environmental, demographic, and cultural realities. In focusing on Senegal, the intention is to not consider other African countries and their relations with Türkiye. Common characteristics can be found in the migration dynamics, deployment, and engagement of diaspora organizations, and development of business entrepreneurship between Türkiye and West African countries. Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Togo, for example, have strong diplomatic relations with Türkiye. But what makes the people of Senegal move is not necessarily what makes other West Africans move, and vice versa, so perceptions, migration networks, and entrepreneurship models may open to different analysis. We are therefore very aware that the particular case of Senegal is far from being representative of the whole of Africa, which remains a universe with different realities and contexts from one country to another. However, Senegal, perhaps like many other countries in the Economic Community of West African States subregion, has long-standing relations with Türkiye.

This paper also seeks to contribute to scientific debate, and to renewing the literature on new routes and migratory experiences of the Senegalese, specifically those between Senegal and Türkiye; the positive and negative impacts on the national economies of both countries are also of importance. The validity of the contribution this paper makes depends on the quality of the data collected and produced, the interpretations they allow, and the knowledge acquired during the literature search and interpretation of survey data. Several data sources were consulted, including searches of specialized databases such as at Senegal's National Statistical and Demographic Agency (ANSD), Senegalese and Turkish news media, Facebook pages of migrant organizations in both Türkiye and Senegal, scholarly

works on Africans or Senegalese in Türkiye, etc. We also reviewed semi-structured individual interviews with migrants, gratis passengers, entrepreneurs, traders, institutional actors, etc., all based in Dakar; this allowed us to better understand the importance of their roles as dynamic actors in the transnational exchange and mobility between Senegal and Türkiye.

3. GPs Connection with Senegalese Sufi Brotherhoods

Most of the participants in this study often belonged to the Muridiyya and Tijaniyya Sufi Muslim brotherhoods. Sheikh Amadou Bamba is the founder of the Muridiyya branch in Senegal (Diop, 1980). The Tijaniyya branch in Senegal (Coulon, 1985, 1988, 1991) is subdivided into multiple ramifications, one of the most important of which is in the holy city of Tivaoune, where Seydi El Hadji Malick Sy founded the Tijaniyya brotherhood at the beginning of the 20th century. The Tijaniyya “Tivaounian” is today the most widespread Islamic school of thought in Senegal. Among the diaspora, the Muridiyya branch is more dynamic and influential. The reign of the caliphs, religious leaders—who are the true power brokers for the devoted disciples—is familial, even clannish, gerontocratic, and highly hierarchical. The sons of the founders lead the spiritual and family lineage. Devoted disciples of these two main brotherhoods run most of these agencies. Their sprawling networks knit together religion and the transnational economy. The success of the Muridiyya and Tijaniyya brotherhoods and their connected agencies in Türkiye, as elsewhere, lies in its ability to manage proximity—a way of life imbued with values with a deep syncretism—and emergencies, but also in its model of self-organization, its own symbolic identification often based on a solid commercial system (Şaul, 2014).

The sheikhs (*seriñ* in Wolof, or marabouts), “canonized” by the great caliphs based in Touba and Tivaoune, remain the main “messengers” throughout the global Senegalese diaspora. In Türkiye, they are often the ones who mobilize disciples and reactivate the universal community of Muslims in the diaspora. This is done firstly through their individual visits to the *taalibé* (disciples) and then collectively when groups of the *taalibé* visit the marabouts at their *daal*, the place where they receive disciples. During their unceasing comings and goings abroad, the marabout-messengers – facilitating the communication – are responsible for collecting *adiya* (donations by devoted disciples) and thus remain centers of spiritual power, also advising on the benefits of sharing economic activities.

In immigrant contexts, marabouts are thus the most capable of setting up *dahira*, groups of disciples organized based on religion and/or villages of origin, one of whose main objectives is to fight against total assimilation of foreign values and the loss of religious identity (Sow, 2004). These organizational cells provide *adiya* to help one another during times of (emotional) pain or religious celebrations. They contribute to living costs and help with the repatriation of bodies of the deceased, and perform *hassaid* ceremonies—recitals of poems on the philosophical works of the founding caliphs. They also support one another in times of mourning, and during baptisms and other celebratory events (Sow & Tete, 2007). The sense of solidarity among individual Muridiyya and the Tijaniyya disciples is even stronger since it is closely related to the image of the community in a broader sense. This is the result of religious and economic model (Salem, 1983) of the Muridiyya movement, for example, which historically has operated in countries such as France, Spain, and Italy (Sow, 2004). The spiritual visits of these guides are a kind of “counter-secularization.” The spiritual visits helps bring the devoted disciples closer to Muridiyya and Tijaniyya Sufi philosophy.

In Senegal, as elsewhere, all brotherhoods are hierarchical and follow complex systems of intermediation. Indeed, whether they belong to the Tijaniyya or the Muridiyya brotherhoods, this intermediation between God and the disciples is fully practiced. It is therefore through intermediation that the main connection between the caliph, the marabouts, and the devoted disciples of the diaspora is built. The marabout-messengers constantly remind the *taalibé* of their duty of obedience to islam and to the caliphs. Thus, an international network of solidarity is created that often revolves around the

Grand Magal, an important annual religious festival that brings together disciples from across the diaspora in the holy city of Touba. The logic of gaining status and prestige assigns specific tasks and responsibilities to each disciple or group of disciples. Each knows what he or she must do. Anything that is not done in line with this religious network is automatically disapproved of and could potentially subject the disciple to exclusion from the community.

4. Türkiye's New "Charm Offensive" Towards Africa: Diplomacy, Industry, and Trade

Since the end of the 1990s, with the "Opening up to Africa Policy" (Akca, 2019; Balcı, 2024) Türkiye has been trying to maintain a stronghold in Africa, first in North Africa, but above all in the Horn of Africa (in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan) (Telci & Yimer, 2024). Turkish diplomacy's Africa Action Plan, adopted in 1998, has also turned toward West Africa (Djamanca & Çağlar, 2024). For example, Ankara donated US\$5 million to the now defunct G5 Sahel counterterrorism force in 2018 (Dedet, 2021). Turkish diplomacy is now well established across almost the entire African continent, with a well-run policy of openness to Africa. The originality of this less conditional openness is based on the Turkish state's reliance on three fundamental pillars: humanitarian aid, politics, and economic cooperation. The year 2005 was proclaimed "Year of Africa" in Türkiye, and in 2008 the African Union designated Türkiye as a "strategic partner." The diplomatic offensive is partly due to President Erdoğan being the first Turkish leader to really take an interest in Africa. Erdoğan has made more than 36 trips to African countries since his election in 2014 – always accompanied by business leaders. On his initiative, the Third Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit was organized in İstanbul on December 17-18, 2021, at which an action plan for the period 2022-2026 was agreed on between Türkiye and the many African leaders in attendance (Dönmez, 2021).

The diplomatic and economic-strategic success story is a result of Türkiye's policy of pragmatism—the "diplomacy of leadership"—devoid of the moralizing of other Western powers in Africa. This political pragmatism, which Telci and Yimer (2024) term "hard power-soft power-smart power," also often plays on the sympathy of and sense of Muslim fraternity among certain West African countries, and on an anti-colonialist disposition. Türkiye also boasts of never having colonized any people in sub-Saharan Africa, unlike the predatory European powers of the 18th and 19th centuries. Türkiye's current strategy is discreet and effective, and has enabled the country to increase its presence in Africa. The charm offensive is flourishing, with embassies multiplying across the continent (to more than 40 by 2022). The flagship company Turkish Airlines operates flights to more than 60 African cities. In addition, expanding influence through international cooperation, the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Development (TIKA) has more than 20 offices in Africa, including one in Dakar; and the state-funded Turkish Maarif Foundation operates schools throughout Africa.

One take into account is the quality of the prices of Turkish products, especially in the construction industry and interior decoration. Some African buyers and entrepreneurs speak of "European quality at Asian prices"—and therefore accessible prices. The turnover of Turkish exports to Africa was around US\$15 billion in 2020. Moreover, in terms of development projects, according to the Turkish Economic Policy Institute (TEPAV), the Turkish government has invested more than US\$70 billion in 1,150 projects in Africa over the past 15 years (Schwikowski & Tiassou, 2021). Turkish companies supply the African market with steel for construction, furniture, spare parts, etc. Meanwhile, alongside minerals and energy resources, in West Africa, for example, Turkish buyers are purchasing wood, cashew nuts, shea butter, cocoa, fish products, etc. In Senegal, Türkiye is mainly involved in the fields of large-scale infrastructure, education, humanitarian assistance, agriculture, the environmental services, culture and security, and also trade.

5. Türkiye-Senegal Cooperation

Cooperation and diplomatic relations between Senegal and Türkiye go back to 1900 when an honorary consulate was opened in Dakar to preserve the contacts established with İstanbul (Bendhaou, 2022). The first Turkish ambassador was posted to Senegal in 1963; the first Senegalese embassy opened in Türkiye in 2006. Senegal ranks third after Egypt and Tunisia in terms of visits by Turkish leaders between 1989 and 2022 (Balci, 2024, p. 68). Senegal offers enormous potential for various products such as cotton, fishery resources, cereals, fruits, skins, etc., which are all exported to Türkiye. Former Senegalese President Macky Sall described relations between the two countries as “old relations with a solid and diversified legal framework which affect areas as varied as political consultations, infrastructure, energy: agriculture, education, water, transport, environment, industry, commerce, culture and defense” (Africanews, 2022).

The website of the Senegalese Embassy in Türkiye lists seven reasons why Senegal should interest Turkish investors (Ambassade de Sénégal en Turquie, n.d.a): the country's stability and openness; infrastructure; quality of human resources; growing economy, thanks to Dakar port and Blaise Diagne Airport, an international hub; legal incentive; fiscal framework; and finally, but importantly, privileged access to regional markets and improving living standards. In 2021, the volume of commercial, industrial, and investment exchanges between the two countries reached more than US\$540 million compared with more than US\$91 million in 2008 (Djamanca & Çağlar, 2024, p. 112).

In 2020, the two countries signed agreements in the fields of education, sports, and disaster management, among others; and in early 2022, on media and communications, security, maritime issues, young people, and job creation (Kaplan, 2022). In March 2022, 17 technical, scientific, and economic cooperation agreements were ratified (SenePlus, 2022). Until now the trade balance between the two countries has been in Senegal's favor; but tax advantages for Turkish companies established in Senegal favor Türkiye more than Senegal (SenePlus, 2020).

According to the Senegalese Agency for the Promotion of Exports (ASEPEX), in terms of the legal framework for trade (ASEPEX, 2016), the two countries are governed by World Trade Organization agreements, and have mutually agreed on the most favored nation clause. Turkish exports to Senegal benefit from the common external tariff of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). As members of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the two countries benefit from a broad framework of economic and commercial cooperation through the Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation of the OIC (COMCEC) through economic and commercial relationships. In addition, a system of trade preferences has been established between member states that aims to encourage intra-OIC trade and identifies products that are eligible for preferential tax reductions. This legal framework not only strengthens cooperation between Türkiye and Senegal, but also forges strong links between the various other states belonging to the OIC.

Another element that boosts trade between the two countries is based on the reciprocal visa policy. Regarding Senegal, since April 20, 2011, the Turkish Embassy in Dakar has published a first note titled: “A new procedure for the issuance of a short-stay visa valid for a single entry for businessmen from sub-Saharan African countries at İstanbul airport.” Permission to enter Turkish territory was, curiously, conditioned by the fact that Senegalese/sub-Saharan travelers would have to travel “to Istanbul with the airline Turkish Airlines; businessmen from sub-Saharan African countries (would) be able to obtain a short-stay visa valid for a single entry upon arrival at Istanbul Atatürk Airport” (www.turkeyvisagovt.org, n.d.). Such an assertion shows the desire of the Turkish government to open its space to trade and the free movement of goods and a certain category of people such as the “businessmen”.

For Senegalese Türkiye currently offers a range of types of visas—family, medical, sports, student—which can be requested via consular services or the Turkish e-visa system. Visas “for tourism or business” as well transit visas can be obtained.

For Turkish travelers to Senegal, Senegal offers six visa options, four of which are important for Turkish people: business, work, education, and tourism.

6. Other African and Senegalese Communities in Türkiye and İstanbul

The community of Africans has been growing in Türkiye since the 1990s. Communities from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and Sudan are all well represented (Kaplan, 2015). Nigerians are known in commerce and textiles, Ghanaians in restaurants, Cameroonians in clothing, and Ugandans in textile workshops. The Senegalese excel in street peddling, also called the underground economy, selling watches and spare automobile parts; they also run hairdressing salons and work in shoemaking workshops.

West and Central African migration, above all, is primarily a middle-class phenomenon, composed of urban traders and white-collar workers (Şaul, 2014). Studies on sub-Saharan African migrants and asylum seekers in Türkiye undertaken by Öcal (2005), and later by Brewer and Yüксеker (2006), investigate the diversity of migrants’ backgrounds, and the lack of opportunities and social services in İstanbul. Based on ethnographic research in Kumkapı in İstanbul between 2012 and 2013, Biehl (2014) studies the diversification, and urban and local histories of migrants, as well as their socioeconomic development and housing conditions. Şaul and Pelican (2014) see African international migrants as purposeful and resourceful people seeking to realize their aspirations through mobility in Türkiye. According to Şimşek and Salman (2019), Africans use clever subterfuge to survive despite the harsh conditions they often face. Binaté (2019, 2021, 2022) focuses on the circulation of products “made in Türkiye,” in an entrepreneurial dynamic between Türkiye and West Africa, mainly Côte d’Ivoire, and also on the mobility and skills of African students in Türkiye.

In the early 1990s and mid-2000s, Türkiye became a transit country for Africans traveling to Europe, the Gulf countries, in particular Dubai, and China, more specifically Guangzhou (Diallo, 2014). With the tightening of entry requirements to Europe, some remained stuck in Türkiye, later settling and gradually integrating (De Clerck, 2013).

Statistics on the number of Senegalese present on Turkish soil vary. According to sources from the General Directorate of Security (Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü), in 2011 more than 5,500 Senegalese entered Turkish territory and 4,479 left (Toksoz, et al., 2012, p. 88). It is difficult to find current data but given the circular migration between Dakar and Turkish cities, and the dynamics of Senegalese organizations in Türkiye (Fédération des Sénégalais de la Turquie, n.d.), and mobilization through humanitarian donations (DakarActu, 2020), we estimate that several thousand Senegalese live in and/or pass through Turkish territory.

By the end of the 2000s, a few researchers were endeavoring to study the trajectories of Senegalese established in several Turkish cities. De Clerck (2013, 2015), for example, looks at the Senegalese presence through an analysis of migration and migrants’ aspirations to “transit” through Greece to other European countries. As for Senegalese, their aspirations to join other European countries may change. De Clerck (2013, p. 54) asserts that:

“There are Senegalese migrants who have been living in Turkey for more than 10 years, found a job and learned Turkish, which are all aspects of a process of settlement. These conclusions therefore corroborate an attitude of acknowledgment towards the presence of sub-Saharan African migrants in Turkey on both an academic and political level.”

Part of the Senegalese community outside Senegal is therefore now well established in Türkiye, especially Senegalese students—of whom there are currently more than a thousand throughout the country—who sell African products in the markets and Turkish bazaars. In November 2017, an organization of Senegalese graduates from Turkish universities was created in Senegal, which works to deepen relations between the two countries in the fields of culture and education.

This Senegalese community, above all the Muridiyya brotherhood, is mainly active in trade: they sell itinerantly, especially in the historic district in the heart of the city of İstanbul. They are based in the districts of Fatih-Nisancı or Eminönü, but also in Taksim or in Fatih—where there are Senegalese restaurants and coffeehouses like Café Touba—and in several areas such as Aksaray, Findikzade, Çapa, and Vatan Caddesi. İstanbul is a commercial city, and those who live there are active in the sale of watches and electronic products; they also sell counterfeit perfumes they source from Turks or Syrians. They sell their goods around restaurants and other places frequented by tourists in İstanbul, selling statuettes, trinkets, and gadgets of all kinds, but also African clothes made from wax print fabrics.

7. Mobility of Senegalese Between İstanbul and Dakar, the E-commerce Boom, and Transnational Economic Networks

7.1. İstanbul/Dakar gratis passengers and Turkish transhippers

Traders who are well established in Senegal go back and forth between Türkiye and Senegal. The traders interviewed said they had chosen İstanbul as a wholesale supply center because of the high cost of travel to China and also visa problems with China. Chinese products, like Turkish ones or those from the Middle East, can easily be found in İstanbul and in several cities in Türkiye—Izmir, Konya, and Kayseri. The Senegalese “*are known as diligent and dedicated traders*” (Interview with Samba Sarr, Dakar, January 3, 2020); according to Ndiaye (2020), “the Senegalese nevertheless enjoy a good reputation in Türkiye.”

In the district of Fatih, some Senegalese work as freight “shippers,” “informal postal workers,” (Diop, 2015) or gratis passengers, with reference to flight companies’ free tickets or preferential rates, and—by extension—carriers of tax-free parcels to Senegal and other African countries. We differentiate them from the *kargo* migrants, who transport large quantities of goods and products by boat or via the overland Mediterranean route through Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania to reach Senegal. Gratis passengers or GPs, carrying smaller quantities, take the plane as their means of transport. But they can also often send the rest of their goods by boat or overland through the *kargo* migrants. Given the current absence in Senegal of major distribution giants such as Amazon, Cdiscount, or Ebay, GPs are on the increase, and have become a source of great competition for e-commerce companies with their constant back-and-forth between Türkiye and Senegal. The round-trip dynamics they have developed between Dakar and İstanbul rely on the fact that they benefit from preferential rates for plane tickets. They have succeeded in setting up a paid parcel transport system based on their baggage allowance. It is a well-oiled system, moreover, which has its “*codes, rules with benchmarks and pricing which can change all the time depending on the weight of the goods, the high cost of freight*” (Interview with Alassane Diop, Dakar, January 3, 2020). Nowadays, men and women of all ages invest in the profession of GPs, which was formerly undertaken by women of a certain age. They often do not just carry their own luggage; they also transport luggage for other people who ask for their service. The goods and products transported are from Senegal and elsewhere in West and Central Africa.

Unlike normal passengers who cannot exceed the authorized 43kg, GPs can carry up to 100kg per trip, often with 50% reductions on their fares because of travel offers and loyalty cards with companies such as Turkish Airlines and Air Algérie. GPs have the option of carrying additional baggage to be charged as cargo. Thus, thanks to their frequent flights, they continue to accumulate loyalty points, which sometimes allow them to obtain free tickets. In this environment of permanent transactions, they are

known as GPs *commerçants* (traders), doing the job full-time, sometimes with an entrepreneurial management strategy, and regularly taking two to three return flights per month:

“On the Dakar-İstanbul route, Gratis passengers can earn between 550,000 CFA francs (€800) and 1,180,000 CFA francs (€1,800) net per month ... but certain constraints would still have to be faced: flight changes, the voracity of Senegalese customs officers, customers who do not respect delivery times, missing addresses and wasting a lot of time” (Interview with Arame Ba, Parcelles Assainies, Dakar, January 6, 2020).

Some GP, although they pay taxes on arrival, also take advantage of the fact that their parents often work for certain airlines or at airports in Senegal. The deficiencies of the postal parcel services in Senegal, which have been mired in huge financial scandals in recent years (Press Afrik, 2022), have ended up boosting the activities of the Senegalese diaspora in Türkiye. Thanks to GP, journey times between Senegal and Türkiye have been reduced and the Senegalese diaspora in Türkiye has never been so close to Senegal.

All these elements contribute to give more visibility to GP, who have now become key players in transnational networks, facilitating private economic cooperation that is often based on religious ties. GPs, as other circular migrants, have also mastered digital technology (Kılıç & Bodur, 2024). Most reservations are often made from Türkiye or Senegal via social network groups on WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, and Telegram, which gratis passengers have created in response to a need. Word of mouth and recommendations by GP customer networks also have an impact and allow them not only to garner more new customers, but also to retain old ones. The reliability of the GPs, their seniority (indicated by their date of registration on the platforms that sell GPs services), the number of times their offers of service are posted on the same platforms, and ratings and feedback left by customers are all assets that help them to build a solid customer database. For parcel shipments, the technique is simple: if a customer based in İstanbul, for example, wants to send a parcel, all they have to do is contact the GPs by registering on the online platform or contacting them via the particular social network. Once the GPs has collected the parcel and been paid, the recipient in Senegal can expect to collect it within 24 hours or the time it takes to fly from İstanbul to Dakar. Using social networks, the movement of the GPs and the package can be tracked in real time.

A kind of trust between diaspora customers and GPs has therefore built up over the years thanks to express services, often of purchases made online of goods from Dakar:

“With Türkiye, our compatriots, especially women, have become more specialized in online shopping. Most of my customers shop at Storetirc.com which also has premises in Dakar. But if they cannot find the products they are looking for in Dakar, it is often me who brings them from İstanbul. It is simple, they just need customers to have an account in Storetirc.com and they can shop online quickly ... It is not just cosmetics and clothes that are sold online. For example, materials for construction, herbal teas from Turkish producers such as Caykur and Marmarabirlik are also appreciated by Senegalese. But that often comes by boat order or large cargo plane freight and in addition the Turks have their representatives in Senegal. Jolofcargo.com (created in 2011) that is also a Senegalese-Turkish company is there for heavy freight by boat and by road. We are modest. We bring what we can bring with our 100kg. No more than that” (Interview with Salimata Fall, Dakar, January 3, 2020).

Arame Ba, one of the GPs interviewed, says she carries papers or sensitive objects of great value to Dakar or İstanbul, such as court resolutions, and authorizations for banking operations for people who have their savings accounts domiciled in Senegal. Pay slips, marriage certificates, powers of attorney, etc. are other documents that are often sent from Dakar to İstanbul. The shipment of these valuable documents shows how much trust exists between Arame and her customers, but also contributes to building a solid customer portfolio among the diaspora and the GPs. But there are also risks:

“Ah yes, the risks exist. If the luggage gets lost, says Arame, I am the one who reimburses in full ... it has not happened to me a lot, but it must be said that it has happened to me once! I also rented a room at the Parcelles Assainies quarter in Dakar, where I store the departure and arrival packages ... because I do not want people to come and collect the packages at my place ... just to avoid surprises. When it comes to business, the welcome is always better in the office than at home!” (Interview with Arame Ba, Parcelles Assainies, Dakar, January 6, 2020).

7.2. Bagassu Turkii vs. “Made in China” via transnational e-commerce and social networking

Since the mid-1990s, “Made in China” goods have conquered the hearts of Senegalese consumers and traders. They are easy to find in Senegal thanks in particular to their availability and low prices. In the heart of the city of Dakar, the Pétersen and Centenaire districts have become the Senegalese “China Town” with shops that are well established and sometimes managed by Chinese. All the gadgets in the world, technological equipment (telephones, electronic devices, etc.) and women’s accessories (necklaces, earrings, bracelets) seem to have landed in these two districts of the city. Small Senegalese wholesalers no longer need to go to China for supplies; they find what they need nearby: toys, clothing, trinkets, phone accessories. Practically every product seems to be “Made in China,” supplied by Chinese wholesalers who fill the port of Dakar with several dozen containers each month. The arrival of the Chinese in Dakar has given boost to retail trade, but above all to itinerant sales. This commerce allows small traders to buy supplies from the Chinese shops for resale in the downtown of the city center or in more distant districts of the capital Dakar.

However, Chinese trade cannot meet all of the demand; some large Senegalese wholesalers are obliged to shuttle between Dakar and China to obtain wholesale supplies. The bargain of Chinese products has encouraged the Senegalese to adopt items that are easy to obtain, but which have also contributed to the birth of a new social class of traders whose incomes are modest:

“With Chinese products, 15,000 CFA francs is enough to dress with all the accessories, whereas with local materials or those imported from France, you need a lump sum of 50,000 CFA francs for complete top-of-the-range clothing. It is therefore expensive and that is why Chinese products suit us because they are *ndimbel njaabot*—in Wolof: “products accessible to modest families” (Interview with Fatou Dème, Dakar, March 14, 2020).

Chinese products, in Senegal, are especially popular with young girls who manage to stock up locally—with bodysuits, earrings and necklaces, tights, dresses, pumps, etc.—at insignificant prices. Proximity to major markets and shopping malls that excel in retail has also boosted the Chinese products. The “local Chinese market in Senegal” has multiplied the number of jobs in the so-called informal sector, which is dominated by the followers of the Muridiyya and Tijaniyya brotherhoods. It has reinforced the migratory dynamics of the Senegalese diaspora and traders established in China. Few still go back and forth between Senegal and China.

But “Made in China” goods face stiff competition from “Made in Türkiye” goods, which are gaining ground year on year in Senegal. Several factors can explain the Senegalese switch toward Turkish products: the Turkish authorities’ policy of rapprochement with Africa since 2005; the “grouping” system – several GP gathering money in a common pot to buy or send goods –; round trips made by GPs, which only take six hours to connect Dakar to İstanbul; and the increase in the number of flights between Dakar and İstanbul offered by Turkish Airlines. Added to that, Turkish e-commerce in Senegal has grown based on orders for goods by Senegalese traders to supply the Turkish market. Conversely, Turkish traders, referred to in this paper as “transshippers,” already have large goods warehouses in almost all major cities in Senegal. The rapid dispatch of Turkish products often brought by road via Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania; the tightening of the Chinese visa policy; and, last but not least, the dynamism of the

Senegalese Muridiyya diaspora in Türkiye, which has also helped to develop trade, are all elements that have strengthened the rapprochement between Senegal and Türkiye.

Products of Turkish origin, often called *bagassu Turkii* in Senegal, are “Made in China.” For various reasons, Senegalese traders are beginning to source their supplies from Türkiye that previously have mainly come from China, Europe, or the UAE, especially Dubai. Speculation in Turkish products is blowing up on social networks. It is difficult to open Facebook, Viber, or WhatsApp without coming across an advertisement for products from Türkiye. Telephones, school stationery, dishes, sportswear, bags, clothing, shoes, and kitchen utensils are among the most popular products. Demand especially increased because of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which time China was isolated. Taking advantage of this unfortunate situation, Senegalese traders, most of them followers of the Muridiyya brotherhoods, turned to the Senegal-Türkiye axis using social networks, especially since some traders claimed that Turkish products were better quality. The Muridiyya followers, who excel in trade between Türkiye and Senegal, also take advantage of the Grand Magal religious festival, when an open market is organized annually in Touba, where they showcase their new products. From Touba, goods and products are distributed throughout the country. During the pandemic, the devoted disciples of the Muridiyya brotherhood residing in İstanbul were the most active in mobilizing donations and solidarity actions for Senegalese affected by the pandemic in Türkiye, and toward Senegal and the holy city of Touba, in particular.

However, those who still specialize in Chinese products continue to assert that China can supply all goods of all levels of quality. Each trader therefore chooses the quality that suits them. Some interviewees insisted that for traders who sell large quantities, the Chinese market is much more advantageous.

But Turkish e-commerce has experienced a dazzling surge of interest:

“With Türkiye, orders arrive at the most in four days if it is with freight. With the GPs (gratis passengers), it is less than two days, and the arrival is announced in advance; during the Covid-19 pandemic, it had almost become difficult to receive the luggage imported from China which took at least a month before being shipped” (Interview with Maréme Séne, Dakar, December 27, 2021).

“We no longer travel as we did with China. You place your orders with your contacts on site in İstanbul, in my case I have a friend who lives there, and then I receive them in record time. No need to wait a month like with China before. For me WhatsApp and Facebook are gifts of God; they allow you to do everything and even see the goods you want and choose the models and new brands” (Interview with Mamadou Diouf, Dakar, December 28, 2021).

With Turkish products, alongside GPs and large freight transported by road and boat, a new breed of street peddlers, boosted by social networks, has been born. These are the professionals of the grouping system, the name by which they are known in Senegal. Most have created their businesses and start-ups on Facebook, Viber, and WhatsApp, using these digital channels to their advantage. The system works by the “forwarders” first creating two WhatsApp accounts or Facebook profiles – one to communicate with all the members of the group and another for posts that list the items to be ordered. A single grouping network can have more than 180 members. The WhatsApp or Facebook link thus created is sent to immediate contacts or acquaintances who, in turn, forward them to other contacts, and so on.

The objective is to bring in as many buyers as possible for orders, then the sales quota can be determined. For example, for a purchase of 100 pairs of shoes at factory price, the quotas might be set at a minimum of 10 pairs of shoes per order; this avoids orders for only one or two pairs and promotes bulk orders allowing them to make large profit. Once the full quota of 100 pairs has been reached and the money sent with the supporting documents (at least 50% of each group member’s order’ to be paid via local and fast platforms for sending money, such as Orange Money or Wave in Senegal), the list is

published for verification and checking; then, the order is closed. Money is sent to Türkiye via GPs, Western Union, Ria, or other international money transfer platforms. The person who receives the money in Türkiye places the order, makes the purchase, and sends the purchased goods to Senegal by freight or via gratis passengers.

In Istanbul and other Turkish cities, Senegalese migrants have made this business their living. Their activities consist of acting as intermediaries between the focal point agents in Senegal and the major Turkish suppliers. They are a kind of “beaters” (in French: *rabatteurs*) or order managers, trustworthy, and connoisseurs of the Turkish market, who inform the focal point agents” who remain in Senegal about the quality of products, and the cheapest Turkish suppliers who are offering sales and reduced prices, but also and above all, about the most reliable GPs and freight companies. These migrant “beaters,” many of them digital aces, compete in Türkiye with other nationalities such as Syrians, Iraqis, and Iranians who have also invested in the “beater” system landscape. They are in constant contact with the focal point agents in Senegal and try to provide them with good advice. They are often paid per order. Many focal point agents say the system in Türkiye is less expensive (1kg of freight costs less than 4,000 CFA francs) than China. In Turkish e-commerce the cost of purchases of goods usually already includes the cost of shipping.

Another advantage for buyers is that they can track their order in real time from its departure to arrival at its final destination because the focal point agents are in communication with their clients all the time via WhatsApp. To give clients confidence, focal point agents often post photos of the items ordered and try to answer all the questions clients might have. One of their objectives is to build customer loyalty for their grouping network; the focal point agent is therefore required not only to preach the good word, but also to manage customers who are in too much of a hurry. Most focal point agents have never set foot in Türkiye; some have relatives in Türkiye and others travel long distances—once a year—to visit their suppliers. According to our interviewees, thousands of people engage in grouping practices and among this population are many focal point agents who say they have never left Senegal. Nowadays the most dynamic and remarkable focal point agents are on Tik Tok, the relays are more dynamic and remarkable via TikTok.

Alongside the e-commerce boom’s turn toward Türkiye, a subtle fraud system is gaining ground. The accessibility of the market for Turkish products and their diversity has brought thousands of people into the sector who are often not trained in commerce, who seek immediate profit, and who have taken advantage of the opening of this market. The risk is that the market will become saturated and deal a severe blow to business. A focal point agent interviewed by the daily newspaper *Fédior* (2020) warned:

“Orders are pouring in, Turkish suppliers are rubbing their hands. But today, the market is starting to deteriorate. Products of dubious quality begin to flood it. Novices do not realize it, but the bubble will burst very soon...there are even traders who import lower quality products from China, which are much cheaper, and make their customers believe that they come from Türkiye.”

8. Discussion

This paper opens four avenues for reflection that merit further analysis. Firstly, it would be interesting to carry out complete studies on the volume of goods and products shipped from Senegal to Türkiye, and vice versa, but also to profile and map those who transport them, and to know how much they earn per year. Far from being a way to control their earnings and their savings, the Senegalese and Turkish states, for example, would be better able to support them through the creation of new jobs. It could show the overall turnover of the GPs and Kargo sectors, the Turkish transshippers, and the rising new social media entrepreneurs who trade frequently but never leave Senegal.

Secondly, the e-commerce sector developed by social network entrepreneurs, and often linked to the Muridiyya and Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhoods, is not well known in Senegal, but it generates informal

market. This understudied and little-known niche rightly or wrongly labeled “informal,” deserves greater consideration since it has not only contributed to lower the cost of goods on local markets for consumers but has also made *bagassu Turkii* more widely available in Senegal.

Thirdly, the markets and exchanges that revolve around *bagassu Turkii* are diversely interpreted. Dissatisfaction is visible among local artisans who accuse the *bagassu Turkii* of having contributed to putting a brake on local textile production and creative skills. Several Senegalese artisans—shoemakers, jewelers, tailors—told us, for example, that Turkish products—shoes, leather bags, and clothes, above all—are serious competition for certain local products. The more elaborate and refined *bagassu Turkii* sell easily on the Senegalese market because of their affordable prices, unlike local products that are handmade and often require many hours of work. Such a complaint also deserves to be taken seriously by the Senegalese state. What will happen, for example, when the big distribution giants such as Amazon enter the Senegalese market? Will we face the total disappearance of these local skills, GPs, social media entrepreneurs, and even, by extension, Turkish transhippers?

Fourthly, short-term circular migration—*allers-retours*—is often very neglected in migration studies but constitutes a relevant endogenous solution between rich and low-income countries. By favoring this form of migration, to the detriment of long-stay migration, which can pose more problems for the receiving countries, it is not only possible to boost the economies of low-income countries through migrants’ dynamism, but also to deploy their expertise and skills. Over time, this will build institutional capacity and improve migration policies, legal frameworks, and regulations. It could help to make the mobility of people and goods between states more of a win-win solution and gradually dissipate the fear that currently dominates the political debate over international migration.

9. Conclusion

Diplomatic relations between Senegal and Türkiye date back a long time. The first Turkish honorary consulate was established in Dakar 125 years ago. Formerly treated by Africans as a transit country to Europe, Türkiye is now a destination country in its own right, for Senegalese in particular. Thousands of Senegalese—their exact numbers are still unknown—live and work there and make regular exchanges with their country of origin. In mapping their network dynamics, the cities where we note their presence are Ankara, where Senegal has its embassy; and İstanbul, İzmir, Malatya, Kayseri, and Konya, where there are honorary consulates. İstanbul, city of great bazaars, and Türkiye’s economic center, seems to favor the development of Senegalese commercial activities, and most traders appear to have strong ties with the Senegalese Muridiyya and Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhoods.

According to the interviewees, most Senegalese in Türkiye have taken up residence in İstanbul. They weave a wide web of relations between Dakar and the rest of Senegal, and certain districts of İstanbul. The Senegalese community is well established there, with its own activities and religious organizations, which are partly based on the dynamics of the GPs who maintain an umbilical link between Türkiye and Senegal. However, life in Turkey is not straightforward for them. A worrying situation was noted in 2023 when Turkish police carried out incessant checks on the Senegalese and other Africans, sometimes harassing them at their workplaces and on public transport (Tif TV, 2023). In the wake of these repressive policies, 100 people were arrested, with 70 repatriated. The Federation of Senegalese in Türkiye warned the Senegalese state of some of the problems they were currently facing in Türkiye: precarity, physical/verbal abuses in the rental of apartments, abusive imprisonment, exorbitant payments for the renewal of residence permits, etc.

Despite their local roots in many Turkish cities, many Senegalese also continue to use Türkiye as a transit country—and İstanbul as a transit city—on their way to the Gulf region: Saudi Arabia, and UAE, especially Dubai. Thanks to Turkish Airlines and its preferential rates for loyal customers, the route to Arabia is still at the heart of the mobility of Senegalese who have long developed exchanges of all kinds

with the Gulf countries. But this surge toward the Gulf countries is surely coming to a major turning point in the history of Senegalese migration, thanks to the introduction of Turkish products in Senegal. Indeed, a huge market for Turkish products is penetrating the country's economic fabric, given the share of traders who have started to professionalize or specialize in so-called *bagassu Turkii*.

China, the UAE, and now Türkiye seem to have become the new commercial hubs for Senegalese traders, for whom these countries have become real international supplier markets. Of these, Türkiye seems to attract the most Senegalese migrants, GPs, and new social network entrepreneurs. The emergence of the new type of "informal postal workers" represented by GPs who regularly travel back and forth between Türkiye and Senegal, and the reciprocity and flexibility of visa policies, and the shorter distance between Türkiye and Senegal—compared with China, for example, which is still a major supplier, nonetheless—are assets that boost relations between the two countries. In addition, the frequency of the service offered by Turkish Airlines, high cost of certain European products, drastic restrictions on entering the European Union's Schengen area, boom in Turkish e-commerce, and number of Senegalese involved in e-commerce who never leave Senegal, have ended up making Türkiye more accessible and open as a destination country.

This paper has demonstrated that GPs, Turkish transhippers, and social network entrepreneurs based in Senegal, with strong religious links, and who exchange large volumes of goods between Dakar and İstanbul, represent a new form of relationship between certain African countries and Türkiye. Beyond the difficulties they entail, these relationships should be highlighted as forum for exchange of knowledge, experience, and skills between the Senegalese diaspora, Turkish transhippers, and people in Senegal.

A new era seems to be opening up for transnational trade and African markets; key to this are digital entrepreneurs who have shown a real capacity to adapt in the face of institutional and logistical problems: the tightening of restrictions on entry to European countries, high prices for goods and freight from certain countries, long wait times for deliveries. The activities of GPs, by opening up their services to a varied clientele in Turkish cities and the big cities of Senegal, thus mark a means of encounter and conviviality that mutually enriches commercial exchanges.

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